DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 284 943 UD 025 690

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TITLE Summer Training and Education Program (STEP): Report on the 1985 Summer Experience. Executive Summary.
INSTITUTION Public/Private Ventures, Philadelphia, PA.
PUB DATE Apr 86
NOTE 12p.; For the full report, see ED 283 028.
AVAILABLE FROM The Communications Department, Public/Private Ventures, 399 Market St., Philadelphia, PA 19106.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Achievement Gains; Daily Living Skills; *Internship Programs; Low Achievement; *Potential Dropouts; *Remedial Instruction; Sexuality; *Summer Programs; *Work Study Programs

ABSTRACT

The Summer Training and Education Program (STEP) provides 14 and 15 year olds with a paid summer experience that combines work, remediation in reading and math, and life skills instruction. This national, federally funded program is a response to data which show that poor academic performance and teenage pregnancy are important contributors to dropout behavior and difficulties in the labor market. Four separate but related components comprise the STEP intervention; they are the following: (1) a remediation component which provides instruction in reading and math; (2) a lifeskills and opportunities component which teaches the students responsible social and sexual attitudes; (3) a work experience component in which the participants are paid minimum wage for entry level jobs; and (4) a school year support component which follows the students through the academic year and encourages them to return to STEP for the second summer. The results of this first summer show that the program design operated well. Success was made in stemming the learning losses which usually take place over the summer, Hispanic participants made significant academic gains, and the students' knowledge of birth control was substantially increased. (VM)

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Executive Summary

Summer Training and Education Program (STEP)

Report on the 1985 Summer Experience

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April 1986

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Executive Summary

Summer Training and Education Program (STEP)

Report on the 1985 Summer Experience

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April 1986

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to acknowledge some of the many persons who made important contributions to this report. Wendy Wolf, Director of Research at P/PV, provided overall guidance and gave specific advice regarding analytical and research design issues. Dr. Andrew Sum provided advice on specific design and analytic strategies used in the research. Rickey Etheredge, Ken Libert, Eleanor Hammond and Batia Trietsch -- members of P/PV's data unit -- provided invaluable assistance with the management and analysis of the data. Michael Bailin, Michael Sack, Thomas J. Smith, Frances Vilella-Velez and Gary Walker reviewed early drafts of the report and contributed valuable insights. Paula Strawberry, typed numerous drafts of the manuscript. Natalie Jaffe, Judy Wilmoth White and Ari Eisinger made important editorial contributions. Finally, many individuals at the STEP demonstration sites contributed both time and insights.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Each year, large numbers of youth enter the labor market without basic skills. Their deficiencies are, in many cases, attributable to the lack of a high school diploma -- in itself a factor that reduces long-term employment and earnings prospects.

Research has identified poor academic performance and teenage pregnancy as important contributors to dropout behavior and subsequent difficulties in the labor market. Research has also noted that the early adolescent years are critical to a youth's school progress, and that the summers are times when disadvantaged youth tend to slow, halt and even regress in that progress. The programmatic vehicle selected for addressing these needs was the federally-funded Summer Youth Employment and Training Program (SYETP). SYETP is the largest national program that serves disadvantaged youth, and is operated in every locality in the United States. Incorporating remedial education and other instruction (as well as a school year follow-up) into SYETP produced the Summer Training and Education Program, a national demonstration designed and managed by Public/Private Ventures.

The STEP intervention provides 14- and 15-year-olds with a paid summer experience that combines work, remediation in reading and math, and life skills instruction that emphasizes responsible social and sexual attitudes and behavior. A summer 1984 pilot of the STEP model proved successful, and established the basic parameters of the model that was implemented in the full-scale demonstration initiated in the summer of 1985.

The first summer of the full demonstration yielded encouraging results:

- The STEP design proved operationally feasible and attracted good participation from the target group. A racially diverse group with multiple problems, these youth were clearly in need of an intervention like STEP by virtue of their low economic status, poor academic history and early involvement in sexual activity, which increases the risk of adolescent parenthood. Without an intervention like STEP, many of these youth are likely to drop out of school, experience limited success in the marketplace, and find themselves unable to support the families they will form.

- STEP was successful in stemming the learning losses that would have occurred in the absence of the treatment. While treatment youth scored significantly higher than control group youth at post-test in both reading and math, in the aggregate, both groups experienced losses. The control group losses were

significantly larger than those experienced by treatment youth. Some gains among subsets of treatment youth were also realized -- Asians and youth enrolled at three of San Diego's remediation sites showed pre-test to post-test gains.

- Although most treatment subgroups improved vis-a-vis their control group counterparts in either reading or math, girls and Hispanic youth appear to have benefited most from participation in STEP. Treatment girls outscored control group girls in reading by half a grade equivalent, and in math by one-quarter of a grade equivalent. Hispanic youth in the treatment group outscored Hispanic control group youth by half a grade equivalent or more in both reading and math.

- Participants' knowledge of birth control was substantially increased, and one behavioral impact was achieved: significantly more treatment boys than control group boys reported abstaining from sex during the program period.

The STEP demonstration is being managed by Public/Private Ventures (P/PV), an organization that designs, manages and evaluates social policy initiatives designed to improve job training and education for disadvantaged youth and adults. The demonstration is funded by public and private funds from both national and local sources, including local Job Training Partnership Act Title II-B funds, the U.S. Department of Labor, The Ford Foundation, The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, James C. Penney Foundation, Aetna Life and Casualty Foundation, The Ahmanson Foundation and Lilly Endowment, Inc.

THE STEP MODEL

STEP operates within an existing, federally-funded program that serves large numbers of disadvantaged youth throughout the country during the summer months -- the Summer Youth Employment and Training Program (SYETP). It provides summer work experience and income for youth who otherwise would be unlikely to find jobs. Although SYETP has served many youth over the years, it has had only limited success in helping them make successful transitions to the world of work. STEP demonstrates some additional possibilities for this national program.

STEP's central objective is to provide participants with the means to stay in high school and earn a diploma. In the short term, STEP focuses on attaining objectives that can be observed within the course of a single summer. Among them are:

- increased achievement in reading and math or a reduction in the learning losses usually experienced in the summer months; and

- increased ability to make responsible decisions about sexual behavior.

The demonstration is being conducted in five sites: Boston, Massachusetts; Seattle, Washington; Portland, Oregon; Fresno, California; and San Diego, California. The sites were selected from a number of applicant sites based on their ability to operate an innovative program and to meet program and research design specifications.

Participants in STEP spend two consecutive summers in a program that provides both academic remediation and instruction in life skills in addition to the work experience traditionally available to them through SYETP. In the intervening school year, they take part in a voluntary support component designed to reinforce gains achieved during the first summer and to create expectations for additional gains in the future.

The first cohort of 1,593 14- and 15-year-olds -- half in a treatment group, and half in a control group -- was involved in the summer 1985 program. A second group of equal size will begin the program in 1986.

Four separate but related components comprise the STEP treatment: remediation, work experience, life skills and opportunities, and school year support.

The remediation component provides 90 hours of basic skills instruction in reading and math, with the aim of producing learning gains or, at least, decreasing the losses disadvantaged youth usually experience over the summer months. The STEP model calls for a remediation curriculum that is individualized, self-paced, and competency-based and that utilizes computer-assisted instruction (CAI). Curriculum guidelines mandate clearly-stated competencies, a comprehensive diagnostic test for reading and math, and instructional materials and assessment exercises that can be explicitly related to identified competencies.

The life skills and opportunities component presents a curriculum aimed at developing responsible social and sexual attitudes and behavior among participating youth. It covers such topics as personal decision-making, job equality issues, the consequences of teenage parenting and ways to avoid pregnancy, among them abstinence. The curriculum uses varied presentation formats including lectures, discussions, field trips, role-playing, films and outside speakers.

Work experience is provided through the federally-sponsored Summer Youth Employment and Training Program (SYETP), which funds entry-level jobs in clerical, maintenance and parks and recrea-

tion work. Youth are paid the minimum wage for their participation in both the work experience and remediation/life skills activities.

The school year support component seeks to ensure that treatment youth maintain the academic progress achieved during the summer and return to STEP for the second summer.

To qualify for participation in STEP, youth must be 14 or 15; satisfy the income requirements for participation in the Summer Youth Employment and Training Program, which stipulate membership in economically disadvantaged families; and be in need of academic remediation as demonstrated by low scores on standardized tests, a history of grade retention, or both.

The research design is an integral part of the STEP demonstration. It includes both short-term and long-term objectives, among them: assessment of the model's feasibility; measurement of participants' short-term educational gains and their development of responsible social and sexual attitudes and behavior; and an evaluation of the impact of STEP on high school retention and early labor force experiences. The research report, which presents an assessment of the first summer of the demonstration, focuses on STEP's short-term objectives.

A total of 1,593 STEP-eligible youth were randomly assigned to treatment and control group conditions in the five demonstration sites. Treatment youth participated in the STEP program; control group youth participated in regular work experience. Both were compensated at the same rate -- $3.35 an hour.

In order to minimize the possibility that control group youth would have less motivation than treatment youth to perform well at post-test -- and thereby spuriously elevate the estimate of program impact -- an incentive scheme that followed a lottery format was devised to provide both groups with an external reason for doing their best. Any control group losses that emerge in spite of these incentives would presumably reflect true learning losses.

DEMONSTRATION FINDINGS

In the first two months of its 15-month treatment, STEP achieved many of its objectives. The demonstration was implemented in accordance with the basic program design and STEP's target population -- a racially diverse group of youth at risk of dropping out of high school -- was served as planned. Similarly, STEP was successful in attaining a number of benefits for its participants. Participants fared significantly better than their control group counterparts in reading and math. In addition, participation in STEP substantially increased participants' knowledge of birth control information, and more treatment boys than

control group boys reported abstaining from sex during the program period.

Program Implementation

STEP implementation required close collaboration among a variety of institutions at a level of intensity that was new to most sites. Employment and training agencies, school systems and community organizations collaborated in the implementation of STEP to an unusual degree. Local administrative arrangements varied widely, reflecting both the flexibility of the STEP model and traditional roles and responsibilities within sites. In all sites the level of commitment to STEP was high.

The demonstration recruited a large number of youth clearly in need of a complex, multiple treatment program such as that offered by STEP. By any criterion, this group of young people is highly at risk of dropping out of high school. At 14 and 15, many have already suffered significant academic setbacks. And, although most are sexually experienced, they are not very knowledgeable about contraception, nor do they practice it with any frequency.

Work experience, the most familiar component in the program mix, posed no major obstacles despite the challenge of finding half-time assignments and work appropriate for 14-year-olds.

Life skills instruction, although new to the sites, was delivered with a high degree of success. This seems due, in part, to a uniform curriculum of engaging content and format that provided teachers with a lesson plan, materials and informational resources.

Remediation, the newest and least tried component of the STEP model, was inevitably the most difficult for the sites to implement. At all sites, participants were offered 90 hours of concentrated reading and math instruction that employed a competency-based, self-paced and individualized curriculum and used computers to augment the instruction. In addition, attendance at the remediation sessions was quite high -- on average, 82 percent of all available hours.

For the remediation component, P/PV designed an approach called Community Organized Remedial Education (CORE) that delineated specific elements of the remediation program, detailed a development process for local educators and curriculum specialists to follow, and provided technical assistance to sites throughout the late spring. The pilot experience in 1984 had pointed conclusively to the advisability of such an approach, rather than one that imposed a pre-packaged curriculum on local educators or one that gave them such wide latitude that essential treatment uniformity across sites could not be ensured.

Nevertheless, significant problems were encountered in the implementation of this component, among them a late start-up, the lack of clear guidelines from P/PV regarding the content of remediation, and insufficient resources for curriculum development and teacher training and support.

Drawing from the lessons learned this summer, a number of refinements to the basic model are being made. These include modifications to the remediation curriculum and the development of an expanded life skills curriculum for returning youth.

Impact

At post-test, treatment youth outscored their control group counterparts in both reading and math by approximately one-quarter of a grade equivalent. The impact of participation in STEP varied as a function of sex, race and site.

Treatment girls surpassed control group girls by approximately half a grade equivalent on the reading post-test, while the scores of treatment and control group boys were virtually the same. In math, however, both boys and girls in the treatment group significantly outscored their control group counterparts by one-quarter of a grade equivalent.

Participation in STEP was of greatest benefit to Hispanic youth, whose high school dropout rates are dramatically higher than those for both blacks and whites. Hispanic youth in the treatment group outscored Hispanics in the control group by half a grade equivalent or more in both reading and math. Asians and blacks derived solid benefits as well -- black treatment youth outscored their control group counterparts by one-quarter of a grade equivalent in math. In reading, Asian participants outscored Asians in the control group by half a grade equivalent.

The impact of participation in STEP varied among the sites as well. Treatment youth in Boston scored significantly higher than control group youth in both reading and math. Treatment youth in Fresno and Seattle also scored significantly higher than their control group counterparts in math and reading respectively. However, treatment youth in Portland -- a site that experienced considerable difficulty implementing its remediation component -- were significantly outscored by the control group.

Since the positive impact on reading and math scores is dependent upon control group losses, a thorough exploration of its validity was undertaken. These efforts included the development of a system of incentives to increase control group motivation to perform well, and an analytic investigation of the pattern of pretest to post-test responses of both treatment and control group youth. An analysis of these efforts generally supports the notion that the control group losses reflect true declines in academic skills.

These academic results, while encouraging, should be improved upon. The positive impact on academic performance was attained by stemming learning losses that would have occurred in the absence of the treatment, rather than by producing actual gains over the summer for treatment youth. For this reason, a number of modifications of the remediation component will be made for next summer. They include: development of curricular modules that will be uniformly adopted by the sites, curriculum content that will link all the program components, and an earlier development process.

Participation in STEP significantly increased fertility-related knowledge for every site, race and sex subgroup. Moreover, there is reason to believe that participation in STEP is beginning to have an impact upon behavior. More treatment boys than control group boys reported abstaining from sex during the program period. Moreover, there are reasons to believe that these differences in the self-reported sexual behavior of treatment and control group boys reflect actual differences in behavior. STEP, then, appears to have demonstrated a positive impact on the sexual behavior of boys, an effect unusual among pregnancy prevention programs. This appears to be a direct result of designing the life skills curriculum to provide a balanced intervention for both boys and girls.

In summary, STEP yielded an interesting and complex set of findings during its first summer, on balance quite encouraging. These results from the first eight weeks of a 15-month treatment demonstrate the potential of this program model as a vehicle for improving the life chances of low-income youth at risk of dropping out of high school. After the demonstration's three-year operational phase, participants will be followed until six months beyond their scheduled graduation dates. During this period, they will be interviewed periodically and their school records will be examined in order to measure school retention rates, graduation rates, pregnancy rates and early labor market experiences.